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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR DEC. 9-10 WASHINGTON VISIT OF AK PARTY CHAIRMAN R. TAYYIP ERDOGAN

REF: A. ANKARA 6856

[1](#)B. ANKARA 8252

[1](#)C. ANKARA 7683

[1](#)D. ANKARA 8448

[1](#)E. ANKARA 8382

(U) Classified by Ambassador W.R. Pearson; reasons: 1.5 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: As Turkey's strongest politician Tayyip Erdogan is key to our ability to influence the AK Party government and public opinion on Iraq and other strategic U.S. interests. His heightened sense of pride is undiminished, indeed boosted, by the Kemalist State's continuing attempts to spike his return to full public life; treating him as if he were already head of government will thus pay enormous dividends for U.S. influence in Turkey and underscore to the EU our strong support for a date for Turkish accession talks from the Copenhagen summit. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Coming off a smashing electoral victory by his AK (Justice and Development) Party and a tour of 14 EU capitals where he was welcomed like a head of government, unelected Tayyip Erdogan is the new colossus in Turkish politics. What gave Erdogan's party its victory on Nov. 3 were his reputation as a responsive mayor of Istanbul, his advocacy of fair and just reforms, and his political magnetism across Anatolia, a magnetism enhanced by the State's controversial decision to rule him ineligible to stand for election (ref A). Erdogan is now determined to parlay his victory and new national stature into a restoration of his political rights so he may enter Parliament and assume the prime ministership by late winter or early spring.

[1](#)3. (C) Despite his popularity in urban sprawls and across Anatolia, Erdogan is far from being universally liked. Indeed, he is loathed by most of the Establishment. The Establishment prefers to portray him as a mediocally educated, local tough guy made (too) good, a charismatic but dangerous preacher-politician who will lead Turkey to the Sharia. Many political and bureaucratic insiders tell us that, for this reason, the Deep State (ref B) will do all in its power through legal maneuver or provocations to try to keep Erdogan permanently off balance.

[1](#)4. (C) In this context Erdogan's visit to Washington is an excellent opportunity to promote core U.S. interests by (1) demonstrating that we respect the democratic election results in Turkey and the AK government's commitment to further democratization; (2) strengthening our influence with AK and Erdogan as the paramount politician in Turkey today; and (3) convincing Erdogan, the one politician who can deliver Turkey at this stage, to make the right decisions on Iraq, Cyprus, and domestic political and economic reform.

Erdogan The Man

[1](#)5. (C) Erdogan's charisma, defensiveness, strong intuition, commanding (even authoritarian) presence, common touch -- rare among Turkish politicians -- and slight swagger come from having to make his way as a youth in the gritty Istanbul neighborhood of Kasimpasa, attending a preacher (imam-hatip) high school, and playing professional soccer. He is both prone to emotional reactions and cool in wielding political power. He has a huge self-image and heightened sense of pride, both easily wounded when he thinks he is not being shown due respect, and reacts badly to criticism. Yet he has proved he has a strong pragmatic streak as mayor of the 12 million-strong Istanbul, in trying to break out of sclerotic approaches to Cyprus, and in having a well-tuned (if acquired) sense of timing on when to push and when to hold back on sensitive questions like the headscarf issue.

[1](#)6. (C) Not knowing any foreign language and lacking a strong, well-rounded education, Erdogan relies on his intuitions,

presence, and ability to bond to manage meetings with foreign interlocutors. He will listen intently and expects his interlocutors to treat him and the subject seriously, even earnestly. At the same time, he is open to the well-timed joke or lighter comment. In the latter regard, Erdogan is a passionate fan of Fenerbahce, nicknamed the Yellow Canary, one of the big three Istanbul (and Turkish) soccer clubs; a gift with a yellow or yellow and blue motif would be a hit, especially if accompanied by a comment relating to his passion for soccer. Erdogan's style is to make his points initially softly and laconically; if he meets resistance he ratchets up his second response, becoming more stern with each exchange on the topic. He reacts badly to overt pressure or implied threats. The best way to convince him to take a tough decision is to appeal calmly but man-to-man to his sense of destiny as Turkey's leader.

Erdogan's Party

17. (C) Ref (C) lays out AK's strengths and challenges as they may affect U.S. interests. In the latter regard, we are seeing a post-election differentiation, and thus more of an opening for intra-party tension, in two areas. First, between the party's parliamentary group (which just elected a more religiously conservative set of whips than P.M. Gul expected) and party leadership (which is more weighted to the pragmatic group around Erdogan and Gul). Second, between fiery parliamentary Speaker Arinc and the calmer Gul (ref D). Erdogan will have his hands full keeping the party together as the strains of governing and legislating and outside pressures from the Establishment, public opinion, and foreign policy demands play on the factions and fissures already extant in this conglomerate party. Many of our contacts from left to center-right predict that AK will split within a year. Perhaps this assessment is wishful thinking tinged with envy, but AK indeed faces marked internal stresses going forward.

Erdogan's Government

18. (C) Erdogan is not yet in the government, but by dominating the news he has ensured that everyone here and abroad recognizes him as de facto -- and future de jure -- head of government. Gul's cabinet (ref E), formed under Erdogan's guidance, mixes men with experience dealing with the Deep State or bureaucracy -- Defense (DefMin Gonul is respected by President Sezer, who is otherwise wary of the new government), Interior, MFA, Education -- with insiders from Erdogan's Istanbul municipal administration and some with wheeler-dealer business connections.

19. (C) Gul will rapidly shepherd through Parliament EU-related democratic reforms and the constitutional changes designed to open the door for Erdogan's assumption of the prime ministership, perhaps in mid- to late winter. A large question remains whether AK has a skillful enough pool of talent to staff the Undersecretary levels and below. We thus share Turkish observers' questions about how well AK will be able (a) to respond pragmatically on foreign policy; (b) to maintain credible economic reform and banking supervisory standards; and (c) to carry out its intended strong reform and anti-corruption drives when faced with deeply entrenched interests and practices.

How to Influence Erdogan

10. (C) Given Erdogan's wariness toward the Turkish bureaucracy, it will be key to draw Erdogan aside from his bureaucratic minders to elicit his true thinking on sensitive topics. At the same time, U.S. interlocutors can enhance the impact of their message if they have aides cultivate his closest advisors, especially Erdogan's closest foreign policy advisor Omer Celik. In the wake of the Dec. 3 Wolfowitz-Grossman visit, we suggest the following approach to Erdogan on four key questions:

--Iraq: emphasize the benefits to Turkey of full cooperation in coalition preparations for a possible military operation and convince Erdogan he can sell maximum cooperation as not letting foreigners control Turkey's future: "if you don't play the game you don't make the rules."

--EU and reform: in reiterating the strength of our support for Turkey's candidacy, give Erdogan our latest information on EU member states' stance (as we have been doing regularly in Ankara) to prepare him for his lobbying in Copenhagen, emphasize the crucial impact of further reform, and urge him to portray the Summit decision on Turkey positively.

--Cyprus: urge Erdogan to get Denktas to reach a settlement soonest.

--Economic reform, anti-corruption, anti-torture measures, and open government: note that Erdogan's party will be measured at home most by these four yardsticks, note the centrality of maintaining reform momentum and strong, clean banking regulation for the government's image and for preserving market confidence (Erdogan is coming under the sway of corrupt and failed bank owners).

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